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WILLIAM MACNEILL WHISTLER, M.D.,

Senior Physician, London Throat Hospital.

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[From a sketch by James MacNeill Whistler.]

Obituary.

WILLIAM MACNEILL WHISTLER, M.D.

Senior Physician, London Throat Hospital.

It is with much regret that we have to record the death of Dr. Whistler, the distinguished laryngologist, who succumbed to the after-effects of influenza on February 27th, at the age of 63. He had been in indifferent health for two or three years, but the end came unexpectedly, causing a proportionate shock to his very numerous personal friends.

The Whistler family is of English origin, and bearers of the name are found at Goring, and elsewhere in Oxfordshire, in records of the latter part of the fifteenth century. From one branch of the family which settled in Essex came Dr. Daniel Whistler, who was President of the Royal College of Physicians in the reign of Charles the Second; his name occurs frequently in Pepys's *Diary*. Another branch migrated to Ireland; from it came Dr. Whistler's grandfather, Major John Whistler, who went to America during the Revolution and afterwards served in the American army. His son, George Washington, also served in the army, in which he rose to the rank of Major. After leaving the service he devoted himself to engineering, and took a leading part in the early development of railways in America. So great was his reputation that he was invited to Russia by the Emperor Nicholas to superintend the construction of the first railway between Moscow and St. Petersburg. It is said that no American, except John Quincy Adams, was ever held in such high estimation in Russia. He had very remarkable skill with the pencil, and might have

won distinction as an artist. But the power that was in him was not lost to the world, for it was transmitted to his son James, who has made the name of Whistler illustrious in the world of art.

It is an interesting coincidence that a daughter of Major G. W. Whistler is the wife of Sir Seymour Haden, in whose fame medicine may claim a share but little less than that which belongs to art.

William MacNeill Whistler was born in the United States in July, 1836. A part of his boyhood was spent in St. Petersburg, where he laid the foundation of a linguistic knowledge which included a mastery of Russian, French, and German. On his father's death, in 1849, the family returned to America. He studied medicine at Philadelphia, and took the M.D. degree of the University of Pennsylvania with honours in 1860. During the American Civil War he served as a medical officer in the Confederate States army. In that capacity he did good work, and earned besides a reputation for courage, being known in his regiment as the "plucky little surgeon." Early in 1865 he was entrusted with despatches to deliver to the Confederate Agent in Liverpool, and, after running more than one blockade, and many adventures and hair's-breadth 'scapes, he succeeded in reaching England. He was preparing to return when the news of Lee's surrender at Appomatox and the downfall of the Confederacy changed all his plans.

After a year of wandering in Russia and other countries, he settled down to work first in Paris, and afterwards in London at St. George's Hospital. He was admitted a Member of the College of Surgeons of England in 1871, and a Member of the Royal College of Physicians in 1876. He chose diseases of the upper air passages for his special province of practice, and was appointed Physician to the Hospital for Diseases of the Throat. He severed his connection with that institution in 1886, and took an active part in founding the London Throat Hospital, of which he was the Senior Physician till his death. He was Honorary Physician to the National Training School for Music, and Lecturer on Diseases of the Throat and Nose in the London Post-Graduate Course. At the annual meeting of the British Medical Association held in Dublin in 1887 Dr. Whistler was President of the Subsection of Laryngology and Rhinology, this being the first occasion on which

these specialities were officially recognised by the Association. In his presidential address to the Subsection he expressed the hope that some proposition for the founding of an association specially devoted to the advancement of laryngology might be brought forward, and steps taken towards its accomplishment. This hope was afterwards fulfilled, perhaps beyond his expectation, for two bodies of the kind are now in existence. One of these, the British Laryngological, Rhinological, and Otological Association, owed its foundation largely to the initiative of Dr. Whistler, who was for some time its President. Of the other, the Laryngological Society of London, he was also a member. He was also a member of several other professional societies, British and foreign.

Dr. Whistler did not write much, but the comparative scantiness of his production was due not to intellectual barrenness, but to the almost painful conscientiousness of his literary workmanship. No man ever took such pains to see things within the sphere of his vision as they really were, or was more scrupulously accurate in stating the results of his observation. Hence his work, though not considerable in amount, is of great value. Among his writings may be specially mentioned his *Lectures on Syphilis of the Larynx*; his *Notes on Operations in Syphilitic Strictures of the Larynx* (for the treatment of which conditions he devised a useful instrument); the article on Diseases of the Nose, contributed to Quain's *Dictionary of Medicine*; papers on the Prognosis of Laryngeal Phthisis as influenced by Local Treatment, in the old *Medical Times and Gazette*; and others published in the *BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL* and the *Lancet*.

Dr. Whistler was a man of singularly lovable character; it was impossible to come within the range of his personal influence without feeling his power of attraction. He had a delightful gift of quiet humour, and his varied experiences of life and wide knowledge of men and cities supplied him with a wealth of amusing stories which he told with great effect. He was a man of wide intellectual interests and had a highly cultivated taste in art. His very oddities—the slowness in his speech and the extreme deliberateness of all his movements—which in another man might have been irritating, somehow added to Whistler's charm. Of the attachment felt for him by patients, a remarkable proof was given two or three years ago. Four of his old

comrades in his campaigning days, who had benefited in one way or another by his skill, sent him their photographs in a group with a letter testifying to their ever-living gratitude to their skilful surgeon. The feeling must have been deep which thus found expression after thirty-three years.

Among his professional brethren Dr. Whistler was held in the highest respect both for his intellectual powers and for his perfect integrity. His name was honoured by laryngologists throughout the world, but it never came prominently before the public. He lacked the "pushfulness" which is supposed to be characteristic of his countrymen, and indeed he hated the "public means which public manners breeds." His death has robbed the profession to which he belonged of a most capable physician and a thoroughly honest man.



